

## Sociology Towards Death: Heidegger, Time, and Social Theory

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Kelly Nielsen and Tad Skotnicki. (2019) "Sociology Towards Death: Heidegger, Time, and Social Theory," *Journal of Classical Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 2: 111-137  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X18772745>

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, we draw on the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger to propose an approach to sociology that takes human experiences of finitude and possibility as crucial topics of investigation. A concern with death is not absent in sociological thought. To the contrary, Durkheim's *Suicide* grounds a sociological research tradition into death and dying. Yet Heidegger's existentialism renders our finitude – not just death – a matter of everyday life, a constitutive feature of human existence and a source of sociological investigation. By explicating Heidegger's interconnected concepts of finitude, futurity, authenticity and resoluteness, we propose to investigate people's ordinary temporal experiences as well as the institutional contexts that make them possible. On this basis, we develop two concepts – existential marginalisation and existential exhaustion – that foreground questions of time, meaning and institutions in the study of poverty, inequality and everyday life.

**Keywords:** Culture | institutions | phenomenology | philosophical sociology | social theory | temporality

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

Human experience is temporal and, as such, the study of time allows us to explore where and how people's experiences illuminate systemic processes (Rosa, 2013). How people use their time (Wajcman, 2015), imagine their futures (Silva, 2013) or call upon the past (Calhoun, 2012) are bound up with systemic social patterns and transformations. These temporal investigations lay bare the connections between practical, everyday life and the structure of the social world. One of the twentieth century's most evocative efforts to conceptualise people's experiences of time occurs in Martin Heidegger's early existential philosophy, particularly *Being and Time*. In that work, Heidegger proposes being-towards-death as the basis for understanding the temporal structure of human existence. As people reckon explicitly or inexplicitly with their finitude, he argues, they invest their lives with significance and appreciate how that significance relates to the worlds in which they live.

Heidegger's appeal for sociologists lies in his description of finite individuals' embeddedness in a social world that can be experienced as profoundly alienating. The approach to human temporality in *Being and Time* offers new angles on classical sociology's central concern with alienation by directing our attention to the way time is experienced in relation to institutional life. Sociologising Heidegger's existential phenomenology generates new theoretical tools for interpreting people's relationships with institutions. While there is a robust sociology of time and sociologists routinely bring time into their analyses (Adam, 1990; Rosa, 2013), making time a constitutive feature of human existence opens new avenues for sociology. Influential sociologists, such as Schutz, Bourdieu and Giddens, have found tacit theoretical inspiration in Heidegger's phenomenology. Yet when sociologists have drawn on his work explicitly, they have avoided being-towards-death and, therefore, temporality. In this article, we fashion conceptual tools from being-towards-death that can guide investigations of the temporal structure of people's experiences in terms of their relevance to social institutions.

We proceed in several steps. First, we discuss the reasons to consider Heidegger as part of a broad tradition of philosophically grounded social science, particularly with respect to alienation. This highlights the distinct temporal orientation of Heidegger's early phenomenology. Second, we look at the ways sociologists have drawn on Heidegger for sociological ends. Surprisingly, they have not exploited his existential and temporal account of human experience, being-towards-death. Third, we elaborate on four components of being-towards-death: finitude, futurity, authenticity and resoluteness. Finally, we propose two concepts based on our reconstruction of being-towards-death – existential marginalisation and existential exhaustion. Using Heidegger to think new possibilities beyond Heidegger, we illustrate how these concepts open up institutionally grounded questions about temporality for sociologists interested in poverty, inequality and consumer culture.

## **Heidegger, alienation and reification**

Although his existential analysis may seem incompatible with sociological investigations, Heidegger shares a central concern with canonical sociological figures: what it means to be human.<sup>1</sup> Our brief overview of alienation and reification recalls classical sociological concerns with the idea of the human (see also Chernilo, 2016; Löwith, 1993) and indicates parallel concerns in Heidegger's existential phenomenology. In the following, we lay out: (a) the grounds for reading Heidegger to inform a sociologically relevant account of the human and (b) the temporal contributions of Heidegger's phenomenology.

Philosopher Rahel Jaeggi (2014) argues that Marx and Heidegger identify overlapping ways that people interpret worlds of their own making as given. In general terms, Heidegger and Marx describe alienation as an absent or deficient relationship with oneself and the world.<sup>2</sup> In Marx, the deficiency originates in the structure and character of labour capitalist societies as workers do

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger was critical of scientific reason, including sociological approaches to understanding the world. While mindful of Heidegger's expressed antagonism to empiricising his philosophy of Being, we reject any argument that Heidegger is inherently unassimilable to sociological concerns. In this, we follow Antonio (1995), who employed Nietzsche's 'antisociology' to reimagine contemporary social theory.

<sup>2</sup> Both also stress the significant role that technology plays in warping people's relations with themselves, others and their worlds. In fact, Heidegger engaged with Marx in an effort to 'trace the materialism of Marxism and communism back to the essence of work and technology', or the externalised production of life (Axelos, 2015: 44).

not own or control their labour. In Heidegger, the deficiency originates in the structure and character of life in public. As Heidegger (2010a [1927]) explained, ‘When Dasein, tranquilized and “understanding” everything, thus compares itself with everything, it drifts toward an alienation in which its ownmost potentiality for being-in-the-world is concealed’ (pp. 171 [178]). We ‘drift towards’ an experience of the world as merely given by the possibilities and concerns of others. Whereas Marx centres capitalist institutions, Heidegger centres our temporal character and grounds these alienated relations in a lack of explicit attention to human finitude. As we will see, this phenomenological approach can help us appreciate the temporal dimensions of alienation in capitalist societies.<sup>3</sup>

We can see a similar preoccupation with alienation in Weber’s characterisation of the individual in the modern world. Weber (1949) pointed to the ‘shallowness of our routinised daily existence’ and the unwillingness or inability of people to choose between ‘irreconcilably antagonistic values’ (p. 18). McCarthy (2003) argues that Weber sought ‘to help in the transformation and perfection of the human being and in the revealing of the connections between social institutions and types of human behavior’ (pp. 103–104). In his venerated lectures on politics and science as vocations, Weber derided the tacit acceptance of a rationalised, cosmically meaningless world and insisted on the tragic necessity of choosing one’s own fate, that is, the meaning of our activities and existence. Even though Heidegger largely left aside explicit questions of social institutions and values, particularly in *Being and Time*, he contrasted the shallow routine of daily life with the active choice of meaningful existence. Like Weber, he draws attention to the fraught existential terrain of human possibilities for decision-making in a world that presents itself as given. Heidegger’s starting point, as we will show, is the future-oriented person engaging that world rather than the institutions structuring that engagement.

These concerns with reification, or accepting the world as given, rooted in the temporal character of being are evident in Heidegger’s understanding of truth. This critique rejected a theory of truth that relied on a correspondence between objects and ideas and Cartesian subject-object dualism. Rather than agreement between the world and our ideas about it, Heidegger (2010a [1927]) understands truth as the meaningful disclosure of ‘innerworldly beings’ or objects (pp. 206–210 [214–219]; see also Haugeland, 2000). To treat truth as correspondence assumes that the subject confronts a reified world – an essential feature of Marx’s account of alienation (Ollman, 1976). To treat truth as meaningful disclosure, on the other hand, requires a relationship with the world based on a self-understanding that begins with one’s possibilities for being in the world.

Durkheim was similarly critical of a correspondence theory of truth. For Durkheim, the basic categories of human experience emerged in relation to practical life. Social thought constructs reality and ‘the reality to which ideas correspond is not metaphysical or transcendental but social’ (McCarthy, 2003: 128–129). His theory of social facts, moreover, recognised that *sui generis* social phenomena can only exist in and through individual consciousnesses. Likewise, Heidegger builds his philosophy of being on the relationship between the social and the individual without lapsing into a dualism that posits a primordial thinking subject comprehending the world (McMullin, 2013). However, understanding the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that both Marx and Heidegger are future-oriented. The realisation of species-being and authenticity requires concern with what is possible. But as we discuss briefly, Heidegger unpacks this temporal dimension of alienation and everyday human experience explicitly.

the social and the individual requires an understanding of our individual relationship with death. In understanding our individual relationship with death, we can learn about the temporal basis for knowledge and truth. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Heidegger begins his lectures on the history of the concept of time with an account of the crisis of modern science – its search for origins and grounding outside of time (Heidegger, 1985)

Heidegger's temporally grounded attack on simple Cartesianism was contemporaneous with Lukács' analyses of reification, which posits a subject neutrally encountering the world. According to Honneth (2008), Heidegger's account of Dasein practically coping with a world of practical significance is consistent with Lukács' conception of praxis as distinct from detached contemplation. Both describe human existence in a world that is always already disclosed and qualitatively significant, and they understand intersubjectivity as an emotional, positively affirming phenomenon in which taking up the role of the other person is always prior to any rational motivation. Where they differ is that Lukács locates the source of the reified subject in capitalist social relations, whereas Heidegger avoids any mention of capitalism as a possible source of subject-object dualism. Despite this divergence, both seek to remove the 'ontological veil concealing the fact of an underlying genuine form of human existence' (Honneth, 2008: 31–32). That is, they are both concerned to articulate a genuine, holistic understanding of human existence in a way that parallels Marx's concern with species-being.

Heidegger's lack of attention to capitalist social relations may help explain why sociologists have engaged so little with his account of the human. These links to classical sociological theory are important, however, because they suggest how we can use Heidegger's temporal work to take a fresh look at alienation and reification, as well as the account of the human that undergirds these ideas. More importantly, they can help us better connect contemporary social problems to core questions about the lived experience of modern institutional life. Given Heidegger's emphasis on temporality, we might expect to see sociologists that draw on Heidegger investigate the temporal dimensions of social life and experience. Yet the most serious engagements with Heidegger build on his insights about human sociality. Consequently, his temporal account of existence remains sociologically underdeveloped.

### **Making use of Heidegger**

At present, the incorporation of Heidegger's thought into sociology has been remarked upon more than demonstrated. Robert Wuthnow (1987) contends that the neoclassical social theory of the 1960s and 1970s assimilated Heidegger's philosophy as part of a broader turn towards phenomenology and hermeneutics, particularly in Peter Berger's sociology.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of this turn, scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 10) and Anthony Giddens (1979) recognised, but never fully articulated, their intellectual debts to Heidegger.

A more promising, less rhetorical bridge between Heidegger's phenomenology and sociology is Alfred Schutz's (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Schutz, like Heidegger, contends that '*the problem of meaning is a time problem*' (p. 12, emphasis in the original). He adapts Heidegger's concept of a 'project' [Entwurfcharakter], emphasising a focus on futurity in

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<sup>4</sup> One reviewer recalled that Berger never read Heidegger, reinforcing our point that the link between Heidegger and sociology is apparent but largely untraced.

a temporally oriented social science. Yet, Schutz provides little guidance for how to work with these Heideggerian concepts. While Heidegger was important for Schutz, the meaning of Heidegger's phenomenology was left out. He does not discuss Heidegger's contributions to a temporal understanding of meaning and adopts his terminology without 'committing ourselves to the explicit meaning he gives it' (p. 59, n. 35). This means that subsequent scholars have had to interpret Heidegger anew.

Sociologists drawing on Heidegger since Schutz have minimised questions of time and projection. Three major foci have emerged instead: (a) socio-ontology, (b) morality and (c) mood and action. Each contributes to a more robust understanding of social life and human beings, but leaves the question of temporality unexamined.

### Socio-ontology

Building bridges between philosophy, the social sciences and artificial intelligence, Dreyfus (1991) emphasised Heidegger's rendering of humans as social in their very foundations. Aspers and Kohl (2013) use this insight to critique sociology's 'egologism'. They argue that sociology is based in a vision of the world consisting of atomistic cognising egos who then construct a social universe. Accordingly, sociology's foundations are Cartesian rather than social.

For Aspers and Kohl, a 'socio-ontology' rooted in Heidegger's conception of humans as first and foremost in the world corrects for sociology's egologism. Inquiry should start from the position that we are always already with others directly in interaction or indirectly in the form of social institutions taken over from past generations (e.g. language). Humans cannot act outside the norms and institutionalised activities of the life-world. The socio-ontological approach offers an alternative mode of reasoning, one that engages the social essence of being and that will help sociologists avoid pseudo-problems stemming from an individualist starting point: collective action problems, micro-macro relations, structure and agency and so on. It opens new possibilities for thinking about social beings, but it also closes off space for considering the individual self in either its origins or its engagement with the world. Excising the individual means diminishing the role of time in any Heideggerian analysis. By working through Heidegger's arguments about finitude, we complement socio-ontology with a more robust temporal account of individuality and institutions.

### Morality

Given his disavowal of morality and ethics, it may be surprising to find Heidegger invoked to build a sociology of morality. Yet Gabriel Abend (2014) has drawn on Heidegger to illustrate the 'moral background'. The moral background describes a series of pre-conditions that underlie ordinary moral thought and action, from grounds and the specification of proper moral objects to methods of argument and metaphysics. Like Aspers and Kohl, Abend turns to Heidegger for an essentially sociological insight: 'intelligibility [of the world] is a function of the social context' (p. 65). This derives from the notion of being-in-the-world, wherein particular beliefs, objects or actions only become intelligible in a context of what Heidegger (2010a [1927]) calls 'relevance'; they are not self-standing or independent (pp. 81–87 [83–88]). The moral background orients sociologists towards questions about the historical, sociological and anthropological

configuration of background assumptions that underlie moral thought and action. Thus, his work on morality illustrates that there is an opportunity to work through Heidegger's thought to illuminate its sociological dimensions. Yet Abend does not pursue the sociological implications of Heidegger's temporal thought for moral life. As with Aspers and Kohl, Abend focuses predominantly on sociality. Our concern with being-towards-death extends this application of Heidegger to ethics by bringing time and individuality into view alongside our social being.

### Mood and action

In addition to broad efforts to rethink social ontologies and moral systems, efforts to reconceptualise action in pragmatic terms have also incorporated crucial Heideggerian insights. Typically, pragmatic accounts of action challenge more voluntaristic descriptions, wherein norms and means-ends schemas guide what people do (Biernacki, 2005; Joas, 1996; Swidler, 1986). Dan Silver (2011) illustrated how voluntaristic assumptions of willful action plague existing sociological accounts of human agency. To develop a positive account of what he calls 'the moodiness of action', that is, 'nonwillful but engaged... action' (p. 204), Silver shifts attention to the conditions and character of situations that can elicit either willful *or* habitual acts. For example, the novice bike rider thinks about and puts an effort into maintaining balance, whereas the seasoned bike rider need not put in the same effort (Silver, 2011: 206; Dewey, 1897: 55). To characterise situations, Silver (2011) draws on Heidegger to underscore how the involuntary moodiness of action 'can *disclose* nonneutral fields that *call forth* responses' (p. 208, emphasis in original). In short, Heidegger provides tools with which to understand and explore how involuntary contexts of action (moodiness) encourage styles of action.

While using pragmatic and phenomenological insights to articulate a more realistic theory of action, Silver (2011) also suggests that we could benefit by examining 'problematical moods' that encourage divided attention and effortful action (p. 214). The most famous problematical mood, according to Silver, is anxiety. In anxious moods, one becomes acutely aware of the problematic or puzzling character of everyday life. Silver (2011) writes,

By more fully investigating the practices and habits that cultivate problematical moods, we can investigate the experience of problematicity as potentially internal to rather than necessarily a falling out of everyday situations. Indeed, we might treat Heidegger or James's lectures as case studies in the production of this sort of mood. (p. 215)

To investigate these problematical moods, however, requires us to specify their character and content. For Heidegger, that means reckoning with being-towards-death. We elaborate on being-towards-death by explicating Heidegger's accounts of finitude, futurity, authenticity and resoluteness. Doing so sheds light on the development and character of problematical moods. More broadly, we can learn how to incorporate the temporal dimension of Heidegger's thought into sociology.

### **Finitude, projection and the self**

Finitude, or the fact that all of us will die, is essential to Heidegger's analysis. For Heidegger (2010a [1927]), the meaning of being [Dasein, or human existence] is care [Sorge] – the concern

that one has for his or her existence – and ‘care is being-towards-death’ (p. 315 [329]). This makes being a temporal phenomenon and ‘The primary phenomenon of primordial and authentic temporality is the future’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 314 [329]).<sup>5</sup> The existential character of our being is such that ‘the future has priority’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 314 [329]). Even our understanding of the past and present is shaped by our projects. Of course, when we understand the future, we are also understanding the past and the present. ‘As taking care in calculating, planning, preparing ahead, and preventing, it [Dasein] always already says, whether audibly or not: “then”... that will happen, “before”... that will get settled, “now”... that will be made up for, that which “on that former occasion” failed or eluded us’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 387 [406]). Nevertheless, Dasein is ‘essentially ahead of itself’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 387 [406]). The fact of our death grounds and attunes us to the future, whether or not we explicitly consider our inevitable demise.

Heidegger does not cast the future as a mere matter of passive expectation of events to come. Rather, ‘Dasein comes toward itself in its ownmost potentiality-of-being’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 311 [326]). He describes this embrace of the future more dramatically in the lectures on time: ‘The being must run forward toward the possibility, which has to remain what it is. It must not draw it near as a present but must let it stand as a possibility and be toward it in this way’ (Heidegger, 1985: 318 [439]). Thus, to characterise Dasein as ‘ahead of itself’ means that humans project ourselves onto these possibilities in a way that never quite forecloses on further possibilities. Oriented towards the future, we get ahead of ourselves and we ‘come towards’ the possibilities of our lives. Put another way, our lives are the possibilities we have for a finite existence, possibilities that are socially given but individually experienced and, in some cases, individually chosen or accepted as our own. Day-to-day, this active future orientation takes a more immediate shape as we concern ourselves with ‘what can be taken care of, what can be done, what is urgent or indispensable in the business of everyday activity’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 322 [337]). Longer term, our future orientation may involve several projects we hope to accomplish or a commitment to a single life project. Our sense of the future moves between distant and proximate moments, between life projects and to-do lists; it is neither something ultimately achieved nor passively expected but rather an active embrace of possibility in the shadow of finitude.

As noted above, sociologists have pointed out that this future orientation is inherently social as projects, tasks and the tools to accomplish them come from the social world. They also have an individual quality, or potential, that stems from the way that people relate to their own death through anxiety. As Heidegger (2010a [1927]) argues, ‘Anxiety individuates Dasein to its ownmost being-in-the-world which... projects itself essentially upon possibilities’ (pp. 182 [187–188]). Since nobody can die for us, we are confronted with the uncanniness of our individual but fully social existence. Our awareness of limited time and multiple possibilities, many of which will necessarily go unfulfilled, manifests as anxiety over the fact that we cannot escape death. The anxiety from being-towards-death often leads us to a flight [Flucht] into everyday life to avoid reckoning with our finitude. We take life as it comes and absorb ourselves in busy work.

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, being refers to Dasein or human existence.

These socially informed future orientations are crucial to our sense of time. For Heidegger, imagining the future means that people may have a sense of time as stretching out endlessly or a sense of inevitable finitude based on one's own life. This sense of time as endless is rooted in our relationship with death, as is our sense of our own finite existence. But these senses of time come about in different experiences. On one hand, people may respond to the anxiety produced by the fact that we will eventually die by absorbing themselves in the day-to-day concern with immediate tasks, experiencing time as an infinite succession of 'nows', as in, now this, now this, ad infinitum. According to Heidegger, 'The succession of nows is uninterrupted and has no gaps' and that, 'If the characterisation of time keeps primarily and exclusively to this succession then, in principle, no beginning and no end can be found in it as such' (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 402–403 [423–424]). On the other hand, people may respond to the anxiety of death by recognising their own finitude and taking responsibility for one's life project.

### **Authenticity and resoluteness**

Finitude and projection lead into one of the most controversial distinctions in Heidegger's *Being and Time*: authentic [eigentlich] and inauthentic [uneigentlich] modes of being. Authenticity involves the recognition of our capacity to take responsibility for our existence – an existence that we care about, in light of its essential openness or possibility (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 275–276 [287–288]).<sup>6</sup> Such a capacity emerges through our confrontations with finitude. Heidegger calls this 'mode of authentic care' resoluteness. When we confront our finitude, we get a sense of our *particular* existence, which raises the question of responsibility for our lives. 'The Dasein exists', writes Heidegger (1982 [1975]), 'that is to say, it is for the sake of its own capacity-to-be-in-the-world' (p. 170). Through confrontation with finitude, we can learn to take responsibility for our capacity to be in the world. In general, we agree with McMullin (2013) who argues, with respect to Heidegger, an '*everyday* sense of first-personal selfhood' absent explicit, authentic self-understanding is possible (p. 53, emphasis in the original). Consequently, we show how self and society coexist in Heidegger's accounts of authenticity and inauthenticity.

An authentic attitude towards one's existence and relationship with the world acknowledges the possibility of non-existence/impossibility, of which one's death is perhaps the most obvious example (Heidegger, 2010b: 250–251 [261–262]; 1985: 317 [439]). Moreover, experiences of authenticity do not simply displace ordinary, everyday experiences, that is, the tendency to accept the world as given, as an object outside of us – Heidegger (2010a [1927]) calls this ordinary, average, given mode of being in which responsibility for one's existence dissolves 'the they [das Man]' (pp. 122–126 [126–130]). Authentic experiences occur within ordinary, everyday life. Heidegger describes anxiety as something that 'fetches Dasein back out of its entangled absorption in the 'world'. Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein is individuated but *as* being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 182–183 [189]). Authenticity does not entail an escape from ordinary existence, but its reconsideration in light of one's finitude. As such, it is fundamentally bound up with the conditions that lead to inauthenticity (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 252 [263]). In short, one does not live in a permanent state of authenticity or

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<sup>6</sup> While *Eigentlichkeit* is commonly translated as 'authenticity', it could be rendered as 'ownedness', as in taking responsibility for our own lives in light of our finitude. To avoid terminological confusion, we use authenticity throughout. On ownedness, see Haugeland, 2000; Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 275–276 [287–288]).



inauthenticity. Rather, they are two essential aspects of being that bleed into one another (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 42 [42–43]; Havas, 2000).<sup>7</sup>

These existential conditions are the grounds of what Heidegger calls resoluteness – living in a way that one understands possibilities as an essential condition of human existence, encompassing the full arc of one’s life, from birth to death. For Heidegger, these possibilities refer to both features of the world upon which individuals ostensibly decide (e.g. choosing between jobs or how to spend one’s money) and those over which they exercise no effective control (e.g. one’s parents and place of birth). By assessing one’s life in terms of one’s inescapable finitude, a person becomes able to commit to those possibilities – both realised and unrealised – on which their lives are grounded. ‘In resoluteness’, he writes, ‘the most primordial truth of Dasein has been reached, because it is *authentic*’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 282 [297]). To paraphrase Heidegger (1985: 319 [440]), in resoluteness one chooses oneself. Moreover, in resoluteness one remains free to take back one’s commitment. Why? Because Dasein, human existence, is premised on something outstanding – a future. This is what Heidegger (2010a [1927]) means when he describes resoluteness as ‘the disclosive projection and determination of the actual factual possibility’ (see also Heidegger, 1985: 319 [440]) (p. 285 [298]). It does not free one from mundane, everyday existence, but calls one to understand her situation as an individuated being in the world. In philosopher John Haugeland’s (2000) plainer words, resoluteness means ‘living in a way that explicitly has everything at stake’ (p. 73). Thus, resoluteness and self-conscious commitment neither frees one from the social world, nor reduces one to its instrument; it calls attention to those moments when people live their lives in awareness of their possibilities, realised and unrealised, and the one possibility that will definitely come to pass: death.

One may be concerned that authenticity stands opposed, irreconcilably, to inauthenticity. But at least in its Heideggerian form, authenticity and resoluteness call attention to the ways that people interpret the world in light of their place within it and their individuality. Heidegger (2010b: 284–285 [297]) insists on the ‘equiprimordiality’ of authentic and inauthentic modes of experience, as well as their counterparts, resoluteness and irresoluteness. Thus, he writes, ‘Dasein is in each instance already in irresoluteness, and perhaps will be soon again’ (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 286 [299]). He continues, ‘[r]esoluteness means letting oneself be summoned out of one’s lostness in the they. The irresoluteness of the they nevertheless remains dominant, but it cannot challenge resolute existence’ (p. 286 [299]). Even more decisively, he adds, ‘as a constant possibility of Dasein, irresoluteness is *co-certain*’ (p. 295 [308]).<sup>8</sup> As we have mentioned, attention to authenticity and resolve can illuminate being-towards-death as a feature and condition of everyday life. But it also can encourage questions about meaningful human action without assuming an easy opposition between the social and the individual.

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<sup>7</sup> While self-responsibility is only explicitly recognised by Dasein in a state of authenticity, the existential structure that allows for this responsibility is only covered over in everyday and inauthentic existence, not eliminated. That is, our relationship with death, finitude and possibility does not go away when we busy ourselves with the everyday. It is, rather, experienced as something else.

<sup>8</sup> This dynamic relationship between social embeddedness and individuality anticipates later social theorists’ efforts to escape dualistic accounts of social action (Barnes, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979; King, 2004; Martin, 2011; Reed, 2011; Sewell, 2005).

Another concern arises from Heidegger's implicit celebration of authenticity in contrast to his denigration of inauthenticity as craven and shallow. In his critique of Heidegger, Adorno (1973) casts this celebration of authenticity as an ahistorical expression of petit-bourgeois anxiety in rationalised, capitalist economies (pp. 52–56, 62–63).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Adorno insists that the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity speaks of the conditions of experience in a capitalist society dominated by 'exchange relationships' and the 'economic utilisation process' (pp. 101–103). Bourdieu (1991) elaborates on authenticity as a function of social position, emphasising Heidegger's institutional location and philosophical interlocutors as the basis for his concern with authenticity. For our purposes, these critiques of the origins, use and normative implications of authenticity/inauthenticity present an empirical opportunity rather than decisive refutation.<sup>10</sup>

Heidegger's distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity draws attention to the processes through which people come to understand and invest their lives with significance. He acknowledges that both authentic and inauthentic being are meaningful, that is, they matter to people. As Heidegger (1982 [1975]) notes in his 1927 lectures on the basic problems of phenomenology: 'this everyday having of self within our factual, existent, passionate merging into things can surely be genuine... The Dasein's inauthentic understanding of itself via things is neither ungentle nor illusory' (p. 160 [228]). Authenticity *and* inauthenticity indicate situations when people struggle with meaning in the shadow of finitude. The primary takeaway need not be to identify specific people as authentic or inauthentic. Our point is to investigate how people understand their lives in terms of being-towards-death – an essentially meaningful, ordinary experience.

### **Sociology towards death**

Bringing Heidegger's analysis of finitude into problem-based social science opens the way to interpretations of social phenomena that account for what it means to be human. A sociological approach to being-towards-death directs us to begin with the following observations:

1. Future orientations vary according to worldly experience.
2. Experiences of the future may be qualitatively different (on a continuum from authenticity to inauthenticity).

We argue that taking an institutional approach promises to move scholars from Heidegger's phenomenological existentialism to a sociology capable of accounting for these experiences. For these insights to be fruitfully brought into sociology, we need to think about how institutions

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<sup>9</sup> While we recognise the importance of contextualising being-towards-death, to do so adequately would require a separate article. Suffice it to say, Heidegger's account arises within the context of post-war Germany as well as philosophical anthropology and nihilistic currents in thought since the nineteenth century. See, among others, Sheehan (1981), Bourdieu (1991) and Wolin (1993).

<sup>10</sup> These critiques derive their force, in part, from some ambiguities in *Being and Time*. On the basis of Heidegger's own words, McMullin (2013) proposes a suggestive and compelling reconstruction of his thought, wherein authenticity, everydayness and inauthenticity exist on a continuum (pp. 184–230). For the most part, she argues, people spend their lives not in states of authenticity or inauthenticity, but in a state of everyday taking care. This reconstruction circumvents some of the issues that Adorno and Bourdieu raise about authenticity, especially the tendency to cast social life as necessarily inauthentic.

matter with respect to finitude and projection, authenticity and resoluteness from Heidegger's viewpoint. We ask two main questions:

1. How do institutional arrangements shape our relationship with the future, to socially available possibilities and to our own potential for taking responsibility over our lives?
2. What are the consequences of detachment from and variation across those institutions through which people imagine and pursue possibilities?

Whether futural in an immediate or long-term sense, the fact that our humanity is bound to a variable orientation to the future raises important questions for social scientists. Drawing on Heidegger's work, we develop the notions of existential marginalisation and existential exhaustion to rethink existing research on, first, poverty and marginalisation and second, consumer culture.

### **Existential marginalisation**

As we have shown, Heidegger argues that a future orientation is the central condition of our existence. The absence of a future orientation, or a capacity for becoming possibilities, is an extreme form of alienation from oneself and the world. Situations of extreme deprivation lead to what we call existential marginalisation, which we define as a reduced capacity for future orientation. When marginalisation affects the ability of people to imagine a future, it is dehumanising in an existential sense. This can occur both within and outside of institutions depending on how they determine people's temporal orientations. Sociological accounts of the future in social life have not recognised this relationship between inequality, institutions, futurity and alienation.

#### **The future in social life**

Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) recognise that our orientation to the future is indispensable for social life. They argue that interaction is necessarily futural and offer three modes this movement can take: (a) moment-by-moment anticipations (protentions), (b) culturally predictable trajectories and (c) overarching temporal landscapes that we tend to take for granted as inevitable. These modes are loosely coupled. They converge and diverge as people coordinate their lives with one another. Further, there are social consequences when future orientations diverge between individuals and groups. For instance, people with unequal class backgrounds may develop different senses of the future, which in turn reproduce a sense of group belonging and reinforce social inequalities. Yet we cannot make sense of someone for whom there is little or no future since Tavory and Eliasoph's idea of the future is of events to come, as opposed to becoming possibility. We can only analyse their moment-by-moment orientation through its effects on interactions with others, not what it means for them as alienated human beings. Without a clearer account of what it means to be human, the focus is necessarily reduced to analysing interaction without meaningful experience. For Heidegger, the future is an extension of the self, the ground of our possibilities as human beings and not just the site of interaction.

Similarly, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) develop a temporal argument about the character of agency that, if not privileging the future, at the very least encourages us to consider how agency

necessarily encompasses a meaningful concern for the future. They demonstrate that human interaction and agency must be understood in relation to past, present and future. Yet they do not account for those people who cannot imagine a future. By relying more on Mead (1932) and other pragmatists to theorise future-directed agency, they fall back on a framework of temporality rooted in the physical sciences and oriented towards problem solving rather than care.<sup>11</sup>

This is an important problem for sociologists. Anticipation of the future has become a cultural imperative rooted in the speculative processes of capitalist institutions (Adams et al., 2009). Our specific orientation towards the future is today overdetermined by cultural systems rooted in late-capitalist societies. Key features of the present are the pervasive anxiety and ongoing restructuring of social life according to the way ‘regimes of anticipation’ are distributed throughout society (ibid). From this perspective, not having a sense of the future is a problem, but only because it produces inequalities, not as a matter of an alienated existence.

We link the arguments that: (a) people are socioculturally expected to be oriented towards the future, (b) agency is bound up with the future and (c) future orientations can vary by social location with Heidegger’s argument that being is a primarily futural entanglement with the world as possibilities. By doing so, sociologists can better explore what different future orientations, or lack thereof, mean for people, existentially. Giddens (1991) initiated this line of thinking with his concept of ‘ontological security’. Ontological security refers to the taken for granted emotional and cognitive frameworks that guarantee, however tenuously, some protection against existential anxiety, interpretive chaos and meaninglessness (p. 37).<sup>12</sup> If we look at people’s future orientations, however, we may be better able to gauge to what extent people are ontologically secure. Moreover, by looking at the institutional arrangements that constitute their lives, we can discover the institutional conditions of possibility for an imagined future.

### Finitude and institutions

Oscar Lewis (1966) inaugurated a debate about the causes and consequences of poverty when he argued that a cultural demand for high aspirations and detachment from mainstream institutions such as work, political parties, hospitals and schools led to fatalism and an overwhelming orientation to the present ‘with relatively little disposition to defer gratification and plan for the future’ (p. 23). At the same time, institutions such as prison and welfare do not mitigate these consequences of overall institutional isolation. Lewis’ suggestion that the way to eliminate the culture of poverty is to restructure the institutions of society to allow the poor to more fully participate indicates how institutions shape and distribute the capacity for projecting into the future.

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<sup>11</sup> This is similar to the argument that Silver (2011) makes about mood and action, which we discuss above.

<sup>12</sup> Giddens (1991) elaborates on the existential anxieties so well described by Kierkegaard and Heidegger, only to reject a ‘philosophy of authenticity’ (p. 50). Yet, as we illustrate, we need not treat Heidegger’s claims about the priority of finitude as a priori ontological truths. Rather, we can reformulate these substantive claims about finitude as the basis for sustained empirical examination of existential marginalisation, existential exhaustion and other maladies

Since the 1960s, however, public institutions serving the poor have withered at the same time those penalising those very same populations have expanded, leading to what Wacquant (2008) calls 'hyperghettoization'. With the rise of market-based anticipation and an intensifying of 'ambition imperative' driving aspirations (Nielsen, 2015), isolation in poor communities often leads not to a complete absence of future orientation, as Lewis found, but to future projects that are disjointed, amorphous and fantastical (Hall et al., 2008; Young, 2004). Nevertheless, these projects, even when they verge on apparent incoherence, can mean a sense of possibility and, therefore, a reason to exist.

In their study of youth from 'highly distressed public housing projects that were some of the most physically and socially degraded spaces in our nation' (p. 3), DeLuca et al. (2016) found that life under conditions of extreme poverty led to a loss of hope that often took the form of listlessness, procrastination and excessive sleep. The difference between those who overcame the negative effects of poverty, at least somewhat, to continue working towards social mobility were those who developed an 'identity project' – defined as 'a source of meaning that provides a strong sense of self and is linked to concrete activities to which youth commit themselves' (p. 66). These projects 'can serve as a virtual bridge between challenging present circumstances and an uncertain, but hoped-for, future' (p. 9). According to DeLuca et al., identity projects are associated with strengthened ties to institutions like school and work through the teachers, coaches and co-workers that populate them, as well as diminished likelihood of homelessness, substance abuse, social isolation, suicide and total disconnection from mainstream institutions.

As DeLuca et al. argue, the youth who lacked an identity project 'had no map, no foothold on their future. Often, they could not shake loose the dark and traumatic experiences of their childhood and fell through the cracks when schools and other institutions did not catch them' (pp. 9–10). When they state that 'their identity work was not just about discovery, it was about survival' (p. 10), they are making a statement that is perhaps truer than they intended. Yet, they are unable to say why an identity project or its absence has these effects. Heidegger's framework allows us to make sense of this link between individual projection and relations with the social world. Without an identity project, connection to the social world and possibility deteriorates. When DeLuca and her colleagues ponder if 'the core function of the identity project is to preserve psychic wholeness in the face of very challenging conditions' (p. 67), they might also inquire if it does not also preserve ontological wholeness by ensuring a future to 'come towards' along with a present and a past.

Projects are particularly difficult to imagine either when a person is detached from institutions or embedded in institutions that discourage them altogether. Sociologists of homelessness are well attuned to the marginalisation that occurs as a result of both detachment and discouragement. Avery's (2012) study of an extremely isolated homeless man in Atlantic City, New Jersey illustrates just how the ability to imagine a future steadily erodes. He eventually reaches the conclusion that 'after many years of living on the streets... there was no clear future for George' (p. 149). The question for those who would attempt to integrate him into mainstream institutions is always 'then what?' Avery observes such complete existential marginalisation that this man saw himself as indistinguishable from garbage, inhuman. But Avery cannot explain the necessary relationship between his lack of future orientation and sense of inhumanity. Heidegger's temporal framework connects these phenomena.

Of course, not all isolated homeless people are so existentially marginalised. Irvine's (2013) study of homeless pet owners exposes the futureless quality of acute social isolation by showing what happens when isolation abates. She contrasts the sense of stagnation and an inability to narrate a future at the lowest point in a homeless person's experience with the redemptive quality of caring for a pet while homeless. According to Irvine, animals bear witness to the existence of the homeless pet owner, allowing possibility to reemerge in their life. Caring for a pet has the added benefit of amplifying the care for oneself. The restoration of housing for some homeless youth may have a similar effect as the absence of rules and presence of disorder give way to a future-oriented way of life (Farrugia et al., 2015). Alternatively, when housing becomes unstable, a sense that there is no future can develop (Desmond, 2016). Both cases show how the social conditions of projection underlie future-oriented being.

While pets or stable housing can have a restorative effect on the futural experience of homeless people, institutions such as shelters and jails that make up what Gowan (2010) calls the 'homeless industry' can impede homeless people's ability to be futural. For example, incarceration stands in the way of homeless people getting a job and contributes to seeing 'little alternative to their current existence, given the patent impossibility of succeeding' (p. 109) long after release from prison. Gowan describes 'the death of forward-moving time for those caught in structureless, stigmatized limbo' (p. 171) and the importance of meaningful labour for those men and women who dedicate themselves to the project of recycling. Yet while the ability to work, or even imagine that one is working, is critical for many to maintain some sense of forward-moving time, caseworkers commonly prevent homeless people from pursuing work and instead push them to focus on overcoming the perceived causes of their homelessness, such as addiction. Even where homeless people imagine possibilities for themselves, homeless industry workers can erode this futurity by reframing it as fantasy and delusion. From the perspective of human being as future-oriented temporal existence, enforced presentism is a form of dehumanisation.

Perhaps the most dehumanising of all institutions, chattel slavery denies enslaved people the ability to project into the future. In *Freedom as Marronage*, Roberts (2015) argues, quoting Frederick Douglass, that freedom was bound up with projection:

In Douglass's estimation, 'The thought of only being a creature of the *present* and the *past*, troubled me, and I longed to have a *future* – a future with hope in it'. Douglass temporally gains wisdom from the past and present, using that wisdom to envision a future, comparatively free condition (p. 78, emphasis in the original).

His humanity is asserted in imaginative flight into the future. This example simultaneously demonstrates the link between dehumanisation and the diminished capacity of the enslaved person to project onto a future, as well as the ability of people to resist dehumanising institutions.

Institutional arrangements that limit the capacity for some people to imagine the future diminish, but do not necessarily erase, their ability to fully exercise their humanity. Sociologists can examine the ways people are incorporated into presentist, alienating and dehumanising

institutions to better understand how existential marginalisation occurs to a greater or lesser extent.

Importantly, the web of institutions that constitute poverty and slavery are not the only sites where existential marginalisation can occur. People in relatively privileged institutional positions can experience similar movements towards isolation and away from the future. Sennett's (1998) example of laid off tech workers is a case in point. Following their experience with being let go from IBM, Sennett observed a group of former white-collar workers as they came to blame themselves for their situation and withdrew from the social world around them as they focused almost exclusively on the past. Alternatively, involvement in mainstream institutions can occur alongside a diminished sense of the future. Arendt (1961), for example, describes how members of the resistance against Nazi occupation lost the sense of a meaningful future after World War II. This indicates that imminent death does not entail existential marginalisation. Further, relative security and institutional attachment do not ensure an ability to project into the future. Instead, sociologists must attend to the sources of meaning that give projection its force and how this meaning shifts through time. In each case, existential marginalisation calls our attention to people's concern for their future and the institutions that underwrite these concerns. By drawing on Heidegger's analysis of being-towards-death, we can begin to explain why people experience institutions and selfhood in the form of a diminished or absent future. Heidegger helps us make sense of how and why the future plays such an important role.

## **Existential exhaustion**

Institutions do not only underwrite one's sense of their future (or lack thereof). They also underwrite our related temporal senses of possibility and commitments. We use the phrase existential exhaustion to indicate the stress that occurs when our concern (or care, [Sorge]) for our existence meets excess possibility again and again. Consumption supplies an ideal venue with which to examine questions of the future and ethical life. For one, it raises questions of choice and possibility. Moreover, it introduces concerns about authenticity – a matter that has been raised about consumers over and over again in academic and popular discourse. We do not argue that authenticity is achievable or even possible via consumers' purchases; rather, we insist only that the concern with authenticity illustrates meaningful preoccupations with possibility and commitment in consumer culture.<sup>13</sup>

Through a brief discussion of consumer practices, we illustrate how a Heideggerian perspective on authenticity and resoluteness foregrounds the question of what alienation and ethical commitment mean in consumer societies.<sup>14</sup> This allows us, first, to thematise questions of excess

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<sup>13</sup> These commitments will often fail to meet Heidegger's 'standards' for authenticity and resoluteness and may very well indicate inauthenticity and irresoluteness – though Heidegger does allow that authenticity is not an either/or proposition (Heidegger, 2010b: 316 [331]). For analytical reasons, we prefer to follow McMullin's (2013) reconstruction of everydayness as a third term between authenticity and inauthenticity. This holds the tendency to interpret these actions as either authentic or inauthentic in abeyance, at least provisionally. Throughout, we reference authenticity and resoluteness as the problematic through which we can understand consumer experiences and existential exhaustion. But we refrain from adjudicating the authenticity of consumer choice as such.

<sup>14</sup> We are grateful to the reviewer who challenged us to clarify the relationship between existential exhaustion and authenticity. A more thorough specification of this relationship will benefit from research that takes the Heideggerian problematic of authenticity seriously and thereby investigates how people wrestle with possibility in

in people's experiences of authenticity and inauthenticity, which raises long-standing problems associated with the therapeutic self. We can see what happens when, inspired by Heideggerian questions of finitude, we consider how people deal with excess possibilities in light of their mortality. Second, attention to authenticity and resolve suggests a productive way to elaborate on Bourdieu's habitus and everyday taste, one that seeks a stronger account of meaningful human action without sacrificing social structural embeddedness. By drawing attention to the role of commitment, resoluteness opens up questions about how people affirm and experience moral issues in the course of their everyday lives.

By focusing on authenticity and resolve as a problematic, we also circumvent the argument that Heidegger leads only in elitist directions (e.g. Chernilo, 2016: 45). We expect that these consumer experiences adjacent to authenticity and resoluteness will vary demographically and institutionally and we have no *prima facie* reason to believe that authenticity and resoluteness would be limited to particular kinds of people. Ultimately, Heidegger's work asks us to investigate whether and to what extent people's efforts to lead meaningful lives reflect their engagement with (including their flight from) death.

### Excess and the therapeutic self

In a capitalist world of economic incentives and mass-produced goods, consumption has been associated with the quest for authenticity and therapeutic understandings of the self (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Bellah et al., 1985; Illouz, 1997, 2007; Lasch, 1978; Lears, 1981). This therapeutic understanding foregrounds how people manage psychic tensions associated with the modern world through self-help. These tensions are evident especially as people seek to navigate the profusion of goods, advertisements and dream-worlds associated with consumer culture. Moreover, the therapeutic self is easily commodified – see the professional industry around self-help (Illouz, 2008). Shopping itself can be a form of therapy and one can shop for therapy, from self-help books and seminars to psychiatrists and pharmaceuticals. Even those who struggle to make ends meet have become experts in therapeutic language (Silva, 2013: 112–142). Sociologists and others have illustrated how, in this context of psychic tension associated with consumer culture, people build emotional and affective connections through consumer practices and brand relationships of all sorts. Thus, people's consumer practices are cast as crucial to the quest for authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Miller, 2001; Zelizer, 2011). The worlds of commerce and culture are inextricable; as people seek out authenticity and self-care, scholars show that they do so by means of, or in relationship with, commodities and consumer culture. At this stage, the authenticity of such therapeutic projects is less immediately relevant than the framework of authenticity as a means for making sense of everyday life in consumer capitalist societies.

We can draw on Heidegger's account of authenticity to accentuate the ways that people, in their capacities as consumers, navigate the alienating problems of excess possibilities in ordinary life

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and through consumer choice. But we acknowledge that there is a compelling argument for treating consumer choice as inauthentic, in Heidegger's terms. On this point, it seems, Heidegger, Horkheimer and Adorno could agree, if in different terms and for different reasons (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 94–136).



– particularly those that surface in consumer cultures and the associated therapeutic self.<sup>15</sup> How do people cope with the surfeit of choices among consumer goods? These are questions that can become more fraught, not less, with limited resources (Chin, 2001). These excess possibilities give rise to the unreality, fragmentation and paralysis associated with the therapeutic self – a very specific kind of anxious mood (Lears, 1981: 47–58). To illustrate, historian Jackson Lears quotes the poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich, writing in 1892,

Work on me your own caprice,

Give me any shape

Only, Slumber, from myself

Let myself escape! (Lears, 1981: 50)

The excess of an emerging world of mass consumer goods helped to undermine a sense of coherent personhood. Heidegger's account of authenticity highlights precisely these problems of excess: '... as a potentiality-of-being, it [Da-sein, human being] always stands in one possibility or another; it is constantly not other possibilities and has relinquished them in its existentiell project' (Heidegger, 2010a [1927]: 273 [285]). A desire for authenticity requires one to reckon with excess possibilities (one possibility and not others in a finite lifespan) as a matter of course.

Even if one accepts Adorno's critique that the jargon of authenticity mistakes the precariousness of life in capitalist societies for being as such, Heidegger's framework of authenticity highlights a crucial, everyday matter for those living in modern and late modern societies. When consumers confront myriad options in a market, they not only select products (Schwartz, 2004) but also forego all those unselected and the possibilities associated with them. Thus, we can draw on Heidegger's framework of authenticity and inauthenticity to investigate the meanings that people make of their consumption practices given the 'manyness of things' and the ways that people incorporate these things into their finite lives (Abbott, 2014: 11). Moreover, these questions may help us to understand inequality in existential terms as a matter of excess, not just or mainly scarcity. As Abbott noted, 'wealth... saves you the problem of having to think about a lot of things.... A whole set of burdensome information – prices, times, availabilities, future government policies, and so on – can simply be ignored' (p. 22). The matter of authenticity – of seeking to take responsibility for one's life in the face of possibility – invites us to inquire about how people manage and make sense of excess in the context of structurally different capabilities for doing so.

Thus, Heidegger's treatment of authenticity asks us to explore the meaningful connections between excess possibilities and human finitude – something that cultural and social theorists have repeatedly observed but not systematically investigated or synthesised (Giddens, 1991; Shove et al., 2009). In short, Heidegger reminds us to treat these twin issues of excess in light of

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<sup>15</sup> Although we are obviously not committed to a dogmatic reading of Heidegger's phenomenology, we see excess as a productive literalisation of possibility in ordinary experience. On that basis, existential exhaustion could arise when people are confronted with possibilities, like consumer choices, as a matter of everyday life; the consumer experiences these possibilities as excess.

finitude as significant topics for research of consumer practices (or other mundane practices), past and present.

### The problematic of authenticity as the upshot of excess

Consumer choice is thus shot through with worries about what it all means. The counterpart to this worry is the investment of significance in the choices that we do and do not make. We can see this in forms of political or ethical consumption – a practice that many different groups have undertaken.<sup>16</sup> While social scientists have done an excellent job describing the characteristics of those who engage in ethical consumption and consumer taste, they have paid less attention to the positive reasons why people invest consumer choices with ethical significance. Heidegger's emphasis on finitude, possibility/projection and authenticity/inauthenticity provides a guide for investigating how and why people take their consumer choices seriously. We can use existential exhaustion as a way into describing and later explaining political consumerism (or, more broadly, ways that people invest significance in their consumption) – not merely as a function of social position, but of people's experiences as consumers in light of their finite lives.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) famously investigated consumer tastes in relation to social position via the 'habitus'. The habitus refers to unconscious perceptual and embodied schemas and competences formed by past experiences (Bourdieu, 1984: 466; Crossley, 2001: 83). Often, discussions of the habitus lapse into a debate about its determined or deterministic nature: who or what should have priority, the interpreting agent or the social structure within which these agents operate? This is precisely the debate that Heidegger and other phenomenologists (e.g. Merleau-Ponty) sought to short-circuit. In their assessment, Dreyfus and Rabinow (1993) identify the habitus as a concrete descendent of Heidegger's description of being-in-the-world, an 'empirical existential analytics' or 'account of the essential social character of human reality' (p. 35). They distinguish Bourdieu's habitus as an account of human being from his description of symbolic capital and fields, a 'scientific theory of social meaning' (p. 35, 40).

Yet Dreyfus and Rabinow, following Bourdieu, describe these empirical existential analytics as practical, habitual social being (p. 38). When Dreyfus and Rabinow turn to the question of the meaning of being, they gloss Heidegger's account of being-towards-death as emphasising an illusory, 'motivated cover-up of the basic arbitrariness of human purposes... which Heidegger calls "fallenness"' (p. 41).<sup>17</sup> By taking up Heidegger's concern with finitude and authenticity in relation to Bourdieu's account of habitus, we hope to overcome the limits of Bourdieu's scientific theory of social meaning. Bourdieu's habitus can provide a means for discussing the institutionalisation of meanings produced as people wrestle with, and perhaps run from, the crisis of meaning captured by existential exhaustion.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ethical consumption and selective purchasing are far from the only ways to invest significance in consumer choices. We use this example only to illustrate the process of investigating how people do so.

<sup>17</sup> Moreover, they dismiss Heidegger's solution to this problem – finitude, authenticity, futurity, resolve – as 'metaphysical' (p. 44), a move Dreyfus has since walked back without pursuing the sociological implications (Dreyfus, 2000: 312–319).

<sup>18</sup> We approach the relationship between habitus and experience as Heidegger approaches the relationship between science and truth. He is concerned with the manner in which an understanding of being (the ontological) lays the foundation for the science of beings (the ontic) (see Heidegger, 2010b: 10–14 [11–15], 204–217 [213–230]; 1997: 24–27 [35–40]). We contend that being-towards-death forces the question of how people commit themselves to

Consider the development and persistence of political consumerism as a feature of capitalist societies since the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Daunton and Hilton, 2001; Glickman, 2009; Gurney, 1996; Rappaport, 2000; Skotnicki, 2017). When sociologists use Bourdieu to discuss political consumerism, they acknowledge its class-specific character – implicitly and explicitly suggesting a fit between habitus and political consumerism (Adams and Raisborough, 2008: 1175–1176; Schoolman, 2016). The relationship between class and political consumerism has been well documented (Ferrer-Fons and Fraile, 2013; Summers, 2016). But sociologists have also argued that an account which reduces political consumerism to virtue signalling on behalf of a class-based habitus is unsatisfactory (Adams and Raisborough, 2010). Heidegger’s account of being-towards-death asks us to investigate the grounds upon which people feel the need to make their consumption ethically meaningful.

We can elaborate on the well-established association by looking into how people cast their consumer practices as authentic (Strand, 2014; Vannini and Williams, 2009; Zukin, 2004). A project that takes everyday life and significance seriously (Adams and Raisborough, 2010: 257) could investigate the contexts within which people seek to make their consumption ethically meaningful, including their efforts to manage excess in light of existential exhaustion – expanding choices, accelerated social lives and especially their finitude (Rosa, 2013; Shove et al., 2009; Wajeman, 2015). While others have explored how consumption choices come to matter to people, we recommend the problematic of authenticity and resoluteness because it asks us to triangulate excess options, social context and individual experience. Thus, the concern with finitude, futurity, authenticity and resoluteness leavens the social determination associated with the habitus and can help us develop more penetrating accounts of how, when and why people invest their consumption practices with ethical significance.

By taking a cue from Heidegger’s account of finitude, authenticity and resolve, existential exhaustion stands to open up research into the character and significance of finitude and possibility in everyday life. Rather than reduce everyday practices like consumption to virtue signalling, social distinction or social position, we should explore how and why people invest ethical significance in them. From the welter of possibilities that confront consumers with the ethical significance of consumption, we can look into the conditions within which people invest their lives and choices with significance, especially in light of our finitude – an empirical question that finds inspiration in Heidegger’s problematic of authenticity. These questions about existential exhaustion can enhance sociological investigations into the character of modernity and ethics without sacrificing the necessary concern with institutions and institutionalisation. In sum, people wrestle with the problematics of authenticity and resoluteness every day. If we can connect them to extant sociological problems and concepts (e.g. habitus), we stand to better illuminate the human motives and experiences that play into empirical regularities.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

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meanings, something that often disappears in Bourdieu’s scientific theory of social meaning. In the latter, people are more like ‘beings’ given by the world (the realm of the ontic) as opposed to Dasein, or those for whom their very existence is a concern (the realm of the ontological). Perhaps surprisingly, then, Heidegger supplies the resources for noticing active engagement where others typically see only passivity (pace Chernilo, 2016: 42). Either way, this issue demands greater elaboration than we can provide here.

Drawing on Heidegger's account of being-towards-death, we considered two ways to understand our shared humanity: (a) a temporal, future-privileging existential structure and (b) a desire to take responsibility for one's life. These qualities gain salience through the fact of, and our relationship with, our finitude. A better understanding of these shared human attributes invites investigations of how social and institutional practices shape orientations to the future as well as result in their unequal realisation. For instance, if we are primarily oriented towards the future, what are the social conditions of inequality in future orientations? How do people reckon with the problematic of authenticity in the context of consumer capitalism? From the corrosion of a future that attends existential marginalisation to the psychic paralysis of existential exhaustion, we have raised questions about how people experience their lives as possibilities in light of death. Doing so can renew sociologists' engagement with philosophical accounts of what it means to be human entailed by ideas such as alienation and reification.

We have followed Chernilo's (2014) method of philosophical sociology, which 'seeks to elucidate the relationships between implicit notions of human nature and explicit conceptualisations of social life' (p. 340). We agree with Chernilo that questions of central importance in sociology are also philosophical questions. Yet philosophical sociology is aimed at more than exposing the philosophically derived notions of the human in sociological work. By requiring that we conceptualise what it means to be human when we do sociology, philosophical sociology also requires that we foreground the normative dimensions of social life. For instance, Boltanski and Thevenot (2000) contend that legitimacy requires an idea of 'common humanity'. This notion of a shared humanity is also at the centre of Gouldner's (1968) institutional sociology, simultaneously recognising our universal capacity for suffering as human beings and the variability of that suffering because of particular groups encounters with social institutions. Our reconstruction of being-towards-death calls attention to these normative dimensions. Existential marginalisation and existential exhaustion illustrate both shared humanness and institutionally derived inequalities. While we should be attentive to that inequality, we cannot lose sight of our common human experience. Heidegger provides the resources to underscore this common human experience through temporality.

A discussion of authenticity, ethics and alienation via Heidegger raises the troubling question of his anti-semitism and his reactionary politics. After all, he harboured intense prejudices against Jewish people and often associated them, in private, with rootless, alienated modern lives. Further, Heidegger embraced the Nazi Party in the mid-1930s and never took direct responsibility for his collaboration. We see these failings as crucial to an understanding of Heidegger's life and work. At the same time, we also find in Heidegger the intellectual resources to think against the kind of scapegoating that he engaged in. Thus, we build on Heidegger's essentially temporal understanding of being and the concern to take responsibility (authenticity, resoluteness) to raise questions about how people experience and cope with alienation and the pressures of modern life.

Moreover, one could worry about Heidegger's sociological implications on charges of intrinsic elitism and irrationalism (Bourdieu, 1991; Chernilo, 2016; Faye, 2009). Our reading of being-towards-death suggests that Heidegger's very real and disturbing failings do not close off egalitarian reconstructions of his thought. Existential marginalisation and exhaustion address

inequality and alienation through the shared human matters of finitude and possibility. Further, we acknowledge the institutionally structured variation in people's reckonings with finitude and possibility as a threat to their humanity. Göran Therborn (2013) has pointed to the notion of 'existential inequality': 'the unequal allocation of personhood, i.e. of autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom, and of rights to respect and self-development' (p. 49). This existential inequality intersects with (and can amplify) inequities in life chances and resources, but is also worth taking seriously on its own (p. 51). Our notion of existential marginalisation, especially the denigration of the future, may prove a useful extension of existential inequality: the institutionally structured and individually felt consequences of social inequality.

With respect to the charge of irrationalism, we do not interpret Heidegger's (1997: 24–27 [35–40], 2010b 30–32 [32–34], 12–15 [16–20]) early existential phenomenology as strictly opposed to scientific rationality. To argue, as Heidegger does, that one provide an account of the pre-scientific grounds for scientific reason is to deny neither the value nor the possibility of scientific reason. Even if Heidegger allots a privileged place to resoluteness in human existence (Chernilo, 2016; Löwith, 1995) – to quote Bourdieu (1991), 'that free and almost desperate confrontation of existential limits... opposed to rational mediation and dialectical transcendence' (p. 69) – we have sought to demonstrate that these matters need not dictate how we draw on such thought for sociological purposes. Heidegger's account of resoluteness does not, in our reading, negate his emphasis on possibility. Thus, we have rendered being-towards-death in a way that makes human experiences of finitude and possibility matters of sociological investigation. And we have done so in a way that engages Heidegger's phenomenology – including its potential trappings – to move beyond it.

One consequence of sociologists' failure to engage being-towards-death has been an over-socialised conception of the human – strong on social determination and weak on ethical and practical commitment. By importing Heidegger's deeply socialised portrayal of being-in-the-world without its 'existential' counterpart, we lose the ability to appreciate the sociological relevance of crucial and common human experiences – namely, how we project ourselves onto possibilities and seek to take responsibility for our lives. While some reject an individualist and/or biological reading of Heidegger's analysis of death (White, 2005), we believe that sociological approaches to finitude add a valuable dimension for sociological thought and investigation. Concerns with finitude haunt everyday life, from the ways that we imagine our lives and the frameworks through which we imagine them, to the significance we invest in our actions. In unpacking Heidegger's treatment of finitude along with futurity, authenticity and resolve, we suggest that sociologists can open up a more holistic approach to human beings (see also Smith, 2010).

In Julian Barnes' novel, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, he imagines heaven – a world without end and without limit. No one dies without willing death and everyone gets exactly what they want. After getting exactly what he wants forever and ever, the narrator observes, 'It seems to me... that Heaven's a very good idea, it's a perfect idea you could say, but not for us. Not given the way we are' (Barnes, 1989: 307). Faced with the avoidable prospect of perfection without death, the world of possibilities loses meaning and the narrator resolves to die. Barnes' vision of heaven illustrates, negatively, the thematic emphasis of being-towards-death. Faced with the unavoidable prospect of death, our possibilities matter to us and they structure our

experiences of time. A sociology towards finitude takes the experience of possibility in light of finitude as a matter of explicit investigation. This entails questions of how these experiences are organised and distributed as well as how people respond to them. We offer existential marginalisation and exhaustion as two timely illustrations for rendering possibility in light of finitude as a matter of sociological thought and research. We imagine that this line of thinking could inform research into many other circumstances where possibilities – and their absence – become matters of explicit concern: among them, forced migration and displacement, climate change, social welfare provision, capitalist crises, activism and social movements, as well as related social psychological matters such as depression, trauma, therapy and meaning-making practices. Pitched between possibility and certainty, a sociology towards death contributes to our understanding of what it means to be human and how that matters in our lives.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors contributed equally to the paper, in conception and execution. We are indebted to Harvey Goldman for many invaluable conversations as the paper developed, and for reading an earlier draft. We also thank Kwai Ng, Laura Hamilton and Don Everhart for their helpful feedback. Several anonymous reviewers posed searching, thoughtful questions that challenged us to improve the manuscript. Finally, we are grateful to Jeff Haydu, Amy Binder, Rick Biernacki, Richard Swedberg, Sarah Daynes, Jon Ruiz and Daniel Driscoll for their enthusiasm for this project as well as everyone at UCSD who kept the spirit of our accidental forebears in existential sociology alive.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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